DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 807 CS 202 668

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TITLE Basic Backwardness.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (Boston, April 2-4, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Educational Objectives; *Educational Philosophy; *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Humor; *Open Education; Teaching Quality

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the "back to basics" movement is regressive and that regression is the characteristic mode of fear-ridden personalities. It is argued that many people in American society today have lost their ability to laugh and do not have the sense of humor which is crucial to a healthy mental state. Such topics as necrophilia, mental illness, and suicide are discussed. It is argued that rather than teaching students grammar, parts of speech, and related taxonomies, we should teach students to maintain a sense of humor and beware of illusions and lies. (TS)

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BASIC BACKWARDNESS

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It has been said that on one occasion Gertrude Stein was trying to describe her home town and that the best way she could think of to sum it up was to say, "When you get there there isn't any there there."

A variation on that line could be used to sum up the "basics" that some of our more regressive fellows think that there is some way to "get back to." Not only were there never any "basics," there was never any "back to" to get to.

The simple-minded notion that "readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic" were or are "basics" is congenial only to the kind of witless mentality that finds "fundamentalism" of any kind a source of reassuring misconceptions that foster the illusion of certainty -- about anything.

It turns out that regression is the characteristic mode of this kind of fear-ridden personality. In times of stress and anxiety (which seem to be all times in all places) these seekers after certainty regress into the illusions of an earlier time and place, since they regard any contemporary illusions as somehow inferior to older ones. They seem to feel a kind of mystical reassurance as they move backwards into the future. This is not, then, a procedure that is susceptible of a rational discussion. Most human procedures are not susceptible of a rational discussion. Most human problems are not susceptible of a rational solution either, as the presence of so many endless and increasing human problems should clearly illustrate. Since most human procedures that can be identified are also, simultaneously, problems, it is apparent that we are, as usual, in for many more problems than most of us have the energy to contemplate, much less to try to remedy. This is one reason why things always seem to get worse. Things not only seem to get worse, they do get worse. This is usually called "progress."

So, we have in the current "back to basics" movement simply another form of basic backwardness, or regress in response to "progress."

Just in case you didn't know, not many people ever were any good at "readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic." You can look at primary documents relating to the school business at any point in time and find reams of stuff deploring the inability of students (many of whom grow up to be people) to read or write or do arithmetic, or know "basic" historical "facts" or titles of "basic" bits of literature or "basic" geographical data (such as where they are at any given moment in relation to any other given place). We recently had a national survey that was unique in at least one respect: it did not focus solely on "students." It included the general population, and guess what: the "findings" revealed that most people loose on the streets are incapable of figuring out the mileage that their cars get, or the cost per ounce of any kind of canned goods, or how to balance their check books. These people are also taxpayers and voters, and they want to know why kids in school don't know the "basics." One of the main reasons -- not a currently popular one to articulate -- is that they are dumb. Dumb people are not good at school stuff -- well, at least not at conventional school stuff, some of which can be found in simple forms even outside of school. And, as the population continues to increase the probability of more dumb people being loose on the streets is much greater than that of more smart people being loose on the streets. This is one human form of Gresham's law. If you don't know what Gresham's law is then you weren't paying attention in school. School is about the only place you are liable to hear something like Gresham's law described, but there is a declining possibility of that too, since "equality" and "freedom" are now two of the most common words loose

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in the language and their frequency of invocation has made it unpopular to suggest that 1) all people are not as a matter of fact "equal" in all respects, and 2) that there are limits to everything that human beings can (and probably should) do. Item number 1 is dealt with by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. in his short story "Harrison Bergeron," and item number 2 is dealt with by the Greeks in their word "hubris."

Since hardly anybody was ever any good at handling words (especially written words) and numbers to begin with, it is curious that as more dumb people are populating the surface of the earth the expectation that they will be good at handling words and numbers is increasing rather than diminishing. So much for rationality--again. If you don't know about "Harrison Bergeron" or "hubris," and if I were in the business of deploring, guess what I would do.

Let me give a couple of examples to "prove" (for all the good it will do) that the ability to write was never widely enjoyed -- even long before the magic electronic media revolution.

In 1870, the dean of the Harvard medical school declared that "written examinations could not be given because most of the students could not write well enough." Harvard did not have an open admissions policy in 1870, please note. And, in 1873, Francis Wayland Parker presented the following report to the Quincy, Massachusetts school board:

> The pupils could parse and construe sentences and point out the various parts of speech with great facility, repeating the rules of grammar applicable in each case, yet were utterly unable to put this theoretical knowledge to any practical use, as they showed when called upon to write an ordinary English letter.

Now, it is necessary to point out here that our current fellows suffering from basic backwardness suffer from a compound illusion with reference to "basics." One element in their illusion has to do with a knowledge of grammar, parts of speech, and related taxonomies. They really believe that knowing this junk bears some relationship to the ability to write well. Parker figured out more than a hundred years ago that this was not so. But, Parker wasn't dumb. He was very smart, and figured out better ways to have kids try to learn how to make acceptable marks on paper with their fists: today what he developed would be called "open education." Despite sixty years of research reaffirming Parker's subjective judgment, the basic backwarders are out to eliminate open education and just about anything else that might make some sense. So much for rationality -- again.

The kinds of school procedures that Parker developed led John Dewey to refer to him as "the father of progressive education." Those who are basically backward also suffer from the illusion that "progressive education" is the source of all educational evil, thus demonstrating, again, their need to get everything backwards. It is conventional schooling with its relentless, mindless pursuit of the kinds of taxonomies that Parker described as sterile that compounds the problems produced by increasing numbers of dumb people. But then, these dumb people end up in positions of responsibility in the school business as well as everywhere else, including the military, the federal government, politics in general, and large corporations. If you need evidence of relentlessly dumb decisions being made and articulated for, say, the last 100 years, just check the record on those categories of human procedures. As it turns out, we have had in the United States in the 20th century only two presidents who could talk in a way that any fully functioning literate person could bear to listen to. They both happen to have been democrats, and they both happen to have been lousy at handling the kinds of editing details that most English teachers shrivel their brains at "correcting." The number of republican presidents we have had who virtually

couldn't even talk (to say nothing of not being able to walk with some ease if not grace) is simply depressing. Despite the magic of the electronic mass media making their incomprehensible gibberish available to all without any effort, these inarticulate bumblers and liars were enormously "popular" with the taxpayers and voters. What are we to make of that bewildering fact? Or is it just another illustration of the curious consequences of our romantic views of rationality?

Which leads me to suggest some "basics" that have little to do with the current misconceptions of what is "basic." The overriding basic ability that we all need to cultivate is the ability to detect crap-- whenever and wherever it appears. It may not be possible to achieve this noble objective, but what the hell, it's worth a try. Even if we could make it with only 50% of the population, our quality of life would improve by at least 1000%. We simply wouldn't take seriously (which suggests another basic ability the basically backward will never accept, much less think of) the blatherings of politicians, presidents or otherwise; nor would we buy the paranoid and catatrophically myopic delusions of the military which cost us more than half of our gross national product every year; nor would we hold still for the ritualized lying by our corporate "leaders" who rip us off--regularly--in the most despicable ways while lying to us about everything including about how they are improving our quality of life while destroying our environment. We might even be able to smile wistfully, if not benignly, at the dumb, basically backward types who want to make things worse in school while believing fervently that they are making things better.

That kind of basic crap detecting is the most operational and practical and valuable--for everyone, every day of the world--kind of ability that can be identified. How come it isn't obvious to all? Are the basic misconceptions from which we suffer as a society so irrversible and irremediable that we can't even make a gesture in the direction of formal training in crap detection? Or is it just a form of death wish that the death lovers insist that we all act out?

Death lovers, necrophiles as Erich Fromm called them, are the original back to basic dummies, and they comprise a clear and present danger to us all. The CIA and the FBI provide, alas, the most visible examples of what happens when a bunch of death lovers gain power. Who cares how well they can read or write. Their paranoid delusions comprise the most palpable threat to our constitutional form of government on the face of the earth. Is there anything more basic than that?

In case you are not familiar with the characteristics of necrophiles as Fromm described them, let me recount them here. You may not how appropriate they are to the profiles of those who are basically backward.

Fromm put it this way:

> The /necrophile/ is attracted by all that is against life: he craves for certainty, and hates uncertainty; he hates life which by its own nature is never certain, never predictable, rarely controllable. In order to control life, life must be fragmented, cut into pieces that is killed! Death, indeed, is the only certainty in life. The necrophilous person smells death everywhere. Just as Midas transformed everything he touched into gold, so the necrophilous person is fascinated by all that is not alive. He likes to talk about sickness, death, burials, money, gadgets, and punishment. The necrophilous person is attracted by all that does not grow, by everything that is static, by the purely mechanical. He would transform the organic into the inorganic. He approaches life mechanically and bureaucratically, as if all living persons were merely things. He prefers memory to understanding, having to being. He is attracted only to that which he possesses; hence, a threat to his possessions is a threat to his life. And precisely because he is afraid of life which he can not control, he

is attracted to all that is mechanical, to gadgets, and to machines which he can control.

It is hardly necessary to stress that contemporary technological civilization encourages this attitude. Our system tends to make people part of the machine, or subparts of the parts--all unified by the self-same program transmitted to every one through the same education, the same radio, the same television, the same magazine.

The question arises: Where are we headed? If we go on losing aliveness, will we not end up as frightened, isolated, unproductive particles, unfit to live and eventually preferring mass suicide to unbearable boredom?

On the other hand, the necrophilous person--the person with a greatly reduced love of life--can not react responsibly because he can not respond! The only principle by which he decides is that of duty; that is, obedience to "law and order." In acting according to this principle, he also satisfies his own passion for control and the exercise of power over others. To put it differently: by doing one's duty, one may negate one's responsibility.

Today, in a civilization in which everything has become a commodity and everybody has become a total consumer, there are two opposite forces which identify freedom with license. There are the adjusted people who merely consume and are scant alive, and who believe that only if we were ruled by law and order, we could avoid anarchy and licentiousness. And then there are many of the young who believe that freedom means absence of tradition, absence of structure, absence of plan: what is desirable is unstructured, spontaneous action. They often believe that 'the old ideas' and values are of little or no use today, that to know tradition, not to speak of accepting some of it, is in itself an obstacle to freedom. Their error lies in their confusing structure with order. I believe that the word <u>structure</u> applies to living processes, and that the word <u>order</u> applies to mechanical changes.

All life--and all inorganic matter too--implies structure, that is, system. Where structure is destroyed, pathology and death set in. Hence where there is a process of life there must necessarily be structure.

But such structure is radically different from mechanical order. It is through order that life is cut down to fit the demands of those who are afraid of life and are attracted to death. (SUMMERHILL: FOR AND AGAINST, NY: Hart Publishing Co., 1970, pp. 225, 262-263.)

The only addition I would like to make to Fromm's catalog is the point that the necrophile also lacks wit: he takes everything -- except perhaps the misfortunes of others -- most seriously, as befits his Manichaean paranoia. He lacks, in a word, a healthy sense of humor. Which brings me to my second "basic," the ability to use the right hemisphere of the brain as well as the left. The ability in other words to balance the "rational," linear, sequential, word-oriented left-hemisphere with the potential or the right hemisphere, metaphoric, non-linear, intuitive, and virtually wordless. From the right hemisphere comes the power or perspective and creativity -- the preference for open-endedness and original and varied solutions to our endless problems, a different kind of thinking from the single-track syllogisms of the left hemisphere. School ignores half of the human brain in its depressing litany of useless taxonomies.

The ability to laugh is, perhaps, only second to the ability to sleep as an emotional restorative. Man is the only animal, for all I know, with the potential for a sense of humor. A sense of humor then is a basic characteristic only of human beings. Where do we provide for the development of this basic?

Our number one health problem is mental illness. More Americans suffer from this than from all other illnesses combined. One of the first symptoms of mental illness

is the loss of a sense of humor and the loss of the ability to laugh-- to laugh at oneself in particular and at the human condition in general. This ability is increasingly rare among us. There is little in the environment that seems conducive to its development or cultivation.

Dr. Harold M. Visotsky, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Northwestern University, in a recent interview said that emotional depression is growing by epidemic proportions which might contribute to political demagoguery. The apathy and concurrent depression of today's youth not only affects a future generation but also those of older and younger ages [redacted]

Let's not forget that suicide is the second most common cause of death among our youth. We don't have any "studies that show" how well the mentally ill score on reading tests or on SATs, but I'd bet they'd score as well as most elected politicians or employees of the USOE for that matter.

The cultivation and maintenance of a sense of humor, I am saying, may just be the most important humanistic objective to work toward-- personally and professionally. Why not add the burden of sanity to our already heavy load? It would be a funny thing to do. I am quite serious about this, which reminds me that one of the distinctions most of us seem unable to make is that between seriousness and solemnity. Humor is always serious, while solemnity fulfills the function of obscuring the ludicrous. In "The Sense in Humor" Harvey Mindess, a practicing psychologist and a professor at UCLA, put it this way:

> The extent to which our sense of humor can help us to maintain our sanity is the extent to which it moves beyond jokes, beyond wit, beyond laughter itself. It must constitute a frame of mind, a point of view, a deep-going, far-reaching attitude to life.
>
> A cluster of qualities characterizes this peculiar frame of mind: flexibility, in this case an individual's willingness to examine every side of every issue and every side of every side; spontaneity, his ability to leap from one mood or mode of thought to another; unconventionality, his freedom from the values of his time, his place, and his profession; shrewdness, his refusal to believe that anyone--least of all himself--is what he seems to be; playfulness, his grasp of life as a game, a tragicomic game that nobody wins but that does not have to be won to be enjoyed; and humility, that elusive quality. . .A man who can shrug off the insufficiency of his ultimate wisdom, the meaninglessness of his profoundest thoughts, is a man in touch with the very soul of humor.
>
> Each of these six qualities plays its part in the drama of the humorous outlook. The starring role, however, is reserved for another characteristic. We may call it the enjoyment of the ironies that permeate our lives. In order to command a therapeutic sense of humor, we must become acutely aware of the anomalies that run through all human affairs. We must come to know, not theoretically but practically, that the happiest relationships are larded with suffering, that the greatest accomplishments are anticlimactic, that rational acts are motivated by irrational drives, that psychotic thinking makes excellent sense. We must know that assertiveness is the mask of fearfulness, that humility is a kind of pride, that love is a euphemism for lust, that truth is the pawn of fashion, that we cherish our misery, and that we all are more irrational than we acknowledge. (SATURDAY REVIEW, August 21, 1971, p. 10.)

Helping students to come to these kinds of understandings and developing this basic human ability will require us to act as if the human brain includes a right hemisphere as well as a left. Doesn't that seem rather basic? Acting as if the whole brain needs to be acknowledged rather than only one half? Perhaps if we managed to

include this basic we would not be a society that depends so heavily on drugs, both licit and illicit, to get through the day and night. At the present time, if all of the Librium, Valium, Ritalin, and booze, to say nothing of pot and hard drugs, were suddenly denied to our citizenry (yes, the one that pays taxes, votes, and wants to get back to basics) our society would come to a screeching halt! Yes, it would just stop; not as a result of the actions of the enemy that the Pentagon fears most, but as a result of our own inability to make it without some kind of chemical help. Pogo was frighteningly right when he said, "We has met the enemy and he is us."

We need to use both sides of the brain to detect crap and to be able to laugh at it when we do rather than to strain ourselves into an anxious paranoia that requires us to drug ourselves into a feeling of "security" and the illusion of euphoria. That's basic, and there is no way to get "back" to it -- that kind of realization of our human potential is still out in front of us and we'll never get to it by moving backwards.

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